DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 132 565 CS 003 132

AUTHOR Ryan, Florence Holmes
TITLE When George Washington Takes Second Place.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 19p.; Paper prepared at The Hutchison School

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bibliographies; *Biographies; Elementary Education; *Females; *Reading Interests; Reading Materials

ABSTRACT

This document discusses biographies of women, chosen to appeal to young girls, including "So Young a Queen," "Indian Captive," "Wilderness Wife," "Louisa," "Holly Garfield in the White House," "I Mary," "I Varina," "Pattern for a Heroine: The Life Story of Rebecca Gratz," "Theodosia," "Child of the Silent Night," "The Silent Storm," and "Invincible Louisa." A seven-page bibliography of biographies about women is included. (LL)

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Florence Holmes Ryan
2162 Lochlevin Drive
Memphis, Tennessee

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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WHEN GEORGE WASHINGTON TAKES SECOND PLACE

Do you ever get tired of George Washington and Valley Forge? Abe Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation? Daniel Boone of bear killing fame?

Little girls do sometimes. Not that there is anything boring about famous men. It is just that girls identify with Martha, Mary and Rebecca.

Custer's Last Stand is a sad history book event and gory. But the courting of Elizabeth Bacon by the boy general and their devious ways of communication in spite of parental objection are delightful. Girls can laugh when Elizabeth, on the trail with her soldier husband and his troops, is awakened in the night by a mule eating the straw bed on

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which she slept in her wagon. They can shed a tear over Dear, Dear Livy, the frail love of Mark Twain. And they can thrill at the exploits of Belle Boyd, just a girl herself and a spy for the Confederacy.

Martha Washington, who left her comfortable home to spend Revolutionary winters with the Commander of the Continental Army, to knit, roll bandages, and comfort the troops, has greater appeal for young females than the Commander alone with his thousands of ragged, bootless, hungry men.

For a long time I complained that there were too few excellent biographies of women suitable for young girls. As librarian in a Lower School for girls, I needed them. I started a sort of treasure hunt, visiting other libraries, devouring recommended lists and reading all the biographies of females written with juvenile readers in mind I could locate. I discovered many good books though still too few of the caliber of Lois Mills' So Young A Queen, Anne Colver's Theodosia, E. M. Almedingen's Katia, Adrien Stoutenburg's Dear, Dear Livy, and, especially, Ruth Painter Randall's I titles, I Mary, I Jessie, I Elizabeth, I Varina.

These and a number of others are interesting enough to give girls who want to read "for fun." With neither a requirement to read biography nor conditioning for it, most children wander about the fiction shelves when they are "just looking for a book." But in the last few years the situation in our library has changed. Now many students do much of their "just looking" in the biography section.

Two of our teachers create library rushes comparable to basement bargain sales with a provocative sentence or two about a book or by

reading the opening chapter. When these readings are from biography the girls meet a new character or come to know a familiar one better.

It is easy to interest a twelve year old in Jadwiga who, when she was not much older, was forced to be So Young A Queen and marry a feared barbarian. And what contemporary violence can rival burning a country's heroine at the stake? Young hearts are tender -- usually -- and go out in sympathy to Phillis Wheatley, a tiny black girl auctioned naked with a rope around her neck on the slave block. And they are sobered by Anne Frank's diary or the story of Mary Jemison, the white girl who grew up as an Indian.

Biographies as history reinforce social studies. A majority of the biographies of women for girls available in this country concern American women. A chronological sequence of such biographies, beginning with Pocahontas and Mary Jemison, Indian Captive, who was born on a boat bringing her parents to the New World, down to the present parallels the nation's story.

Rebecca Bryan Boone, Wilderness Wife, lived with Daniel in unexplored Kentucky. Narcissa Whitman and her husband, Marcus, helped to open the Northwest. Narcissa was one of the first two women to cross the continent.

Stories of First Ladies of the land add a personal touch to its history. Martha Washington was born in 1731. Several good biographies of her picture life in the colonies and the Revolutionary struggle. Abigail Adams lived through a difficult period and had problems taking care of home, farm and family while John was helping to lay the foundation of a new country. Dolly Madison added glamor to the President's

term just as Jacqueline Kennedy did in recent years. The story of Louisa, Abigail's daughter-in-law and wife of John Quincy Adams, shows how international affairs of government had become in the nation's early years.

One of the most intimate accounts of presidential life is Molly Garfield in the White House written by Ruth Stanley-Brown Feis, daughter of Molly, fourth child of President and Mrs. Garfield.

I Mary, by Ruth Painter Randall, tells a more sympathetic story of Mary Todd Lincoln's relationship with her husband than some other accounts have done. Miss Randall pictures them as reasonably compatible and indicates that, after his assassination when Mary's actions led people to consider her crazy, she had endured enough to cause a temporary breakdown.

I Varina, the life of Mrs. Jefferson Davis also by Ruth Painter Randall, is a story of the same era from the Southern point of view.

Other biographies of women center or touch on the slavery problem. Phillis Wheatley's story tells of difficulties of blacks -- both slave and free -- in Colonial times. Harriet Tubman excaped from slavery but returned to lead over three hundred people to freedom by way of the underground railroad. Sojourner Truth, who chose her name to fit her mission, was the first black woman to lecture publicly against slavery. Actress Fanny Kemble wrote what Harper's Magazine called "the most powerful antislavery book yet written."

Stories of Cleopatra, Catherine the Great, Mary, Princess of Orange, both Elizabeths and other rulers make history of the world outside our own country more personal than textbooks.

A number of the biographees mentioned, we must admit to advocates of the women's movement, are famed because of relationship or marriage to prominent men. But most of the wives of presidents, kings, soldiers, and explorers carried out their own responsibilities.

Women pioneered, not only as Narcissa Whitman and Jessie Frémont with their husbands in the West, but in fields where women had not ventured and were not wanted by the male public.

Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor, was followed closely in time by Elizabeth Garrett, the first woman doctor in England. Emily Barringer was the first woman ambulance surgeon.

No male chauvinist could belittle contributions of Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, and Marie Curie. Edith Cavell opened the field of nursing in Belgium. Dorothea Lynde Dix campaigned almost alone for improved care for the mentally ill. Jane Addams established Hull House in a Chicago slum when social work had no defined sphere. In the nineteenth century Mary Kingsley paid her own way to Africa for adventure and scientific exploration and eventually lost her life when she returned to serve as a nurse in the Boer War.

Of course, there was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leader in the women's rights movement, who wanted the Declaration of Independence to read that all men and women were created equal. Susan B. Anthony, a friend and associate of Elizabeth, worked for rights for both women and black people.

The field of education offered less opposition to women. Pattern for a Heroine: the life-story of Rebecca Gratz who lived from 1781 to 1869 tells that she devoted her life and resources to caring for

children and educating them. She established the first Sunday School for Jewish children. Berry Academy and Berry College are results of the work of Martha Berry who began on a Georgia plantation to make education available to the poor. She Wanted to Read records the struggle of Mary McLeod Bethune, a black girl who went from cotton patch to college presidency. Kate Douglas Wiggin worked with kindergartens and training of teachers in an era when such programs were beginning, and her life story, Yours with Love, Kate, is almost as absorbing as Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm.

Biographies of authors Willa Cather, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Frances Hodgson Burnett make interesting reading, too.

Katia, originally published as The Story of a Little Girl, is Catherine Almedingen's autobiography revised by her great-niece, E. M. Almedingen. The book established Catherine's reputation as a leading children's writer. One sixth grader, a selective reader, called it the best book she had ever read.

Except for Marie Antoinette whose noble moments came only at the guillotine, Peggy Shippen Arnold who likely helped her husband in his treasonous activities, and a few other erring ladies, most biographees are presented to the young as standing on the side of right if not as absolute models of behavior.

There is an overlapping of characters and situations from book to book. It is delightful, after reading several biographies, to find a character from one story walking into the pages of another.

Theodosia and Pattern for a Heroine: the Life-Story of Rebecca

Gratz open when George Washington is coming to their respective towns, New York and Philadelphia. The girls are going to see him. Although Theodosia is only a baby, Aaron Burr insists she must go. Washington Irving is mentioned briefly in both books, also.

Theodosia, in later years, was friendly with Dolly Madison and, when Aaron Burr was in trouble, attempted to gain the First Lady's help for him.

Abigail Adams was presented at court to Marie Antoinette. The story of the Adams family runs through biographies of both Abigail and Louisa.

Contemporary rebels against a system sought help from each other in the nineteenth century when the struggles were for women's rights and against slavery as they do now with related efforts.

Elizabeth Blackwell who became the first woman doctor in spite of tremendous opposition and Florence Nightingale who made nursing an acceptable service career for women became friends. Jenny Lind gave a concert for the Nightingale fund, and Queen Victoria, who was an admirer of Jenny's, supported the nurse's efforts.

Elizabeth Blackwell's goal was to have a hospital for women staffed by women doctors. She was delighted at the opportunity to meet liberal Fanny Kemble and hoped to enlist the help of the actress who had been active in the anti-slavery crusade.

Fanny Kemble listened to Dr. Blackwell and said a hospital for women was an excellent idea, but that it should be staffed by women was preposterous!

Dorothea Lynde Dix, waging her one woman war to improve conditions for the mentally ill, succeeded in promoting the establishment of

thirty asylums for the insane in this country and others abroad. She investigated atrocities and gave press and legislative bodies reports on how the insane were kept caged or in chains or in dark wet cellars with rats. One of the reformers to whom she appealed for help was Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, abolitionist and husband of Julia Ward Howe. He founded Perkins Institute for the Blind where Laura Bridgman, deaf and blind, spent most of her life. Anne Sullivan was educated there. When she left to become the teacher of Helen Keller, she took with her a doll for Helen that Laura Bridgman had dressed. Perhaps it was because of the experience of Dr. Howe with Laura that Anne Sullivan was able to be so successful in teaching Helen Keller. Child of the Silent Night, Laura Bridgman's story, The Silent Storm about Anne Sullivan Macy, and any good biography of Helen Keller make interesting reading continuity.

The stories of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony are inseparable because the two worked together.

Other characters wander briefly from book to book. When Dorothea Lynde Dix called on Thomas Hart Benton hoping for his political support for her hospital project, she found him at home with his beautiful daughter, Jessie Frémont. Invincible Louisa, Louisa May Alcott, was one of the volunteers who helped Miss Dix with nursing duties in the Civil War.

Because children absorb literary values at the same time they learn reading techniques and acquire elementary knowledge, writing for them should always be of the best possible quality.

Some authors, aiming for readibility, over simplify words and phrases until they strip the language of its natural flow. The opening of one

biography is so lacking in rhythm that I almost closed the book. But when the author forgot about writing down, the story was rewarding.

Too many biographies for children have a factual approach allowing little character development, reader identification, or explanation of why events occurred as they did. Some titles with such limitations have value chiefly for information or readability for slow readers.

Others stray too far from fact. Biographies for young readers must be honest although they may not necessarily include the whole truth or nothing but the truth. They should be basically factual, but details of Marie Antoinette's amusements, unfaithfulness of Fanny Kemble's husband, and political and court intrigues can be postponed. The truth, slightly embellished or fictionalized, is acceptable as long as it remains in the probable realm for both person and era and includes only fleshing out of skeletal knowledge to make the story come alive.

It is not too difficult for a biographer to imagine, with help of diaries, other original sources and reliable histories, what Queen Victoria might have said to Melbourne in 1841. But it is rash for a biographer to attribute an unrecorded sentence or gesture to Queen Elizabeth II. As a result of such limitations many biographies of living subjects read like collected items from magazines and newspapers, which they may be.

A warping of truth is never essential. One biography of Martha Washington -- not included in the bibliography -- pictures the President's wife as having an overdeveloped sense of inferiority in the presence of the glamorous Sally Fairfax. The author attributes Martha's feelings to her matronly plumpness. The book was written several years

ago when historians were suggesting Washington's emotions were more than neighborly warmth for Sally, but no such relationship was mentioned in the biography.

Classification of borderline fiction/true stories about people is difficult. Authorities disagree. Strict Library of Congress classification may call a book fiction that is considered biography by H. W. Wilson, Baker & Taylor, or other card supplier. For lower schools the lenient classification is acceptable.

Frequently I suggest to young readers that they check biographies against an encyclopedia or biographical dictionary for two purposes, to verify facts and to organize those facts in chronological sequence.

Most of the best biographies of women for girls begin with early years of the subject. When a young reader becomes interested in the life story of another girl near her own age, her identification can follow through life to old age and even death. Few good biographies for girls begin when the biographee is already grown unless there is a backflash to childhood.

Not strangely, an overwhelming majority of the biographies considered were written by women.

Admittedly I have one little girl with blonde hair and big glasses who is a Daniel Boone fan and another who never tires of Abe and George. But most girls prefer to read about girls in biography as well as in fiction.

We are not trying to recruit future activists for the women's movement. We are supplying material to satisfy reader interest and

reinforce the curriculum. And our students have found friends in Varina, Katia, Theodosia, Rebecca and Mary and Martha, Willa, Jessie, Jadwiga and a host of other accomplished women who first appear as little girls with whom other girls can establish an identification.

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